

LIMITED  
GOVERNMENT  
-HOPE  
OR ILLUSION



*Robert LeFevre*

# LIMITED GOVERNMENT -HOPE OR ILLUSION

When George III ascended the throne of the British empire in 1760, the cry of the oppressed American colonies quickly became: "No taxation without representation."

The cry echoed a forlorn hope. Never did taxation totally cease. And never were the American colonists represented in the British parliament in a regular democratic manner.

Ever since 1936 in our vastly expanded nation, the cry has been: "Let us return to limited government."

It is my position tonight that this cry is as futile and forlorn as was that of our forebears some 200 years ago.

Now, I have considered the implications of that statement for a very long time before making it tonight in this distinguished company.

It has been nearly thirteen years since I last appeared here in First Church with a message for Freedom Club members. At



*An address by Robert LeFerve  
presented at a meeting  
of the Freedom Club of Los Angeles  
November 5, 1963*

that time, I was concerned with events in China. Mao Tse-tung had finally succeeded in wresting a victory from the forces of Chiang Kai-shek and the embattled Nationalists had fled to the Island of Taiwan, where they remain to this day. My talk at that time was entitled: "The Sale of China." It was reprinted in "Vital Speeches."

Now, it is one thing to talk about foreign affairs and quite another to talk about limited government in our own nation. It is usually quite safe to conjecture about foreign places. Contradiction or even controversial opinion is unlikely. This element of safety increases in direct ratio as we move away from home base.

I would like to begin by discussing, not the character or the lack thereof of the men we have in government—always a fascinating subject—but human nature and the nature of government in general. Also, let us consider the forms government sometimes takes, and the direction human nature takes when it operates within government structures.

Man, by his nature, is free. That is to say, each man, by his nature, controls his own energy. This means that each man is responsible for every act he performs. For better or for worse, he controls himself and must shoulder the burden of his errors and may very well claim the kudos for his successes.

The history of the human experience on this planet over most of the past 6,000 years and more, is a history of ignorance of the point I have just sought to make. Most men during this 6,000-year period did not

think that they were free. They did not believe that they could or did control their own energy. Most men even today do not think so.

Like our pagan forebears, most men today imagine that some outside authority controls them. They may call this outside authority by a host of names and attribute to it a great many characteristics; but they are quite certain they do not control themselves and, hence, they do not have to worry too much about being responsible for themselves. Doctrines which teach self-reliance are always uncomfortable doctrines. If you do control yourself, then it must follow that if you fail, you are responsible for your own failure. Few of us like the sound of that kind of reasoning. That is why we like to believe that some authority controls us. Then, if we experience failure we don't have to blame ourselves, we can always blame the authority. And this is what men have almost always done and it is what they are doing now.

The 6,000 years of history to which I have alluded is a history of human failure to obtain enough food, clothing and shelter to survive reasonably well on this planet. Most men during that period experienced some degree of starvation and malnutrition. Most suffered from exposure. And it is not too harsh, I think, to refer to the period before the advent of Lister and Pasteur as the "unsanitary ages."

But when men starved in prior ages, they did not have to blame themselves; they could always attribute their failure to Moloch, or to Baal, or to daemons, or to the mistakes of some king or potentate.



Whatever happened, the responsibility went to some place outside of the individual human being. If success obtained in human affairs, it was because they had a "good king." If failure came, it was because they had a "bad king."

Thus, as you read history you find all people looking up to their king, loving him blindly until failure came, then distrusting him, disobeying him, finally loathing him and getting rid of him. The king is replaced by another king. The cycle repeats. Then another king is tried. And another. And yet another. Finally, a light dawns. It is not the fault of the king, it is the fault of the government structure the king manages. If the form of the government is changed, then the king will do better. So the structure is changed.

The king is replaced by a priest; then the priest, by a king. Then the king and the priest work together. Then one kills the other and declares that he is god. Then the king is called an emperor and he obtains a senate as advisers. Then the senate rules with the king as a puppet. Then the senate calls for a majority of the voters. Finally, we have a king and a priest and a senate and a majority, and custom and a tax collector and a standing army all at the same time.

What I am showing is that two things are involved in any understanding of government. There is a government structure. And then there are men who inhabit the structure. What they do and how they do it relates partly to the way the structure is put together, and partly to their own nature as human beings.

Meanwhile, insofar as the citizens are concerned, they go on from age to age, feeling that there is an authority outside themselves which is responsible for what they do. Even though they get rid of an occasional king or even occasionally revise the governmental structure, they continue to believe that final authority resides either in the structure they have helped to erect or in the men they have helped to select.

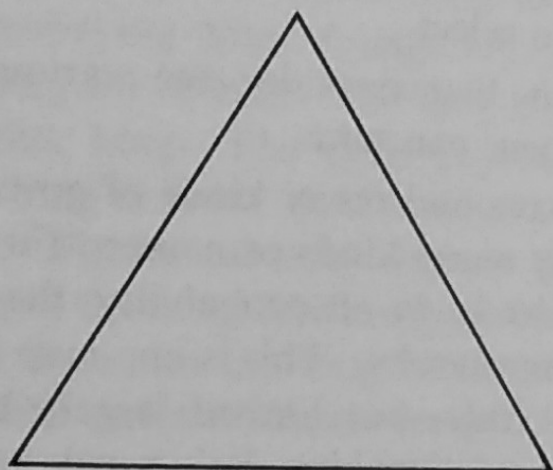
Let us first consider the various forms government can take.

We have had many kinds of governments called by many kinds of names. First in development is, in all probability, the patriarchy or matriarchy. This is one-man (or one-woman) rule, but limited largely by lineal or tribal relationships. It is a rule over people, not so much a rule of geography. Patriarchy becomes readily a kind of theocracy. The pater familias, the patriarch, wishes to obtain instant obedience from his subjects and seeks to convince them that he holds a special position of trust in the eyes of divinity. We call it "the divine right of kings." It is an excellent propaganda technique adopted at an early age by men who knew that their claim to authority over others rested on flimsy ground.

Let patriarchy and theocracy be united for any length of time and it is not unusual for a monarchy to emerge. This, too, is a kind of one-man rule. But the sway is extended now, not only over people but over a geographic area. Additionally, while the "divine right" of the king is continued and enlarged upon, a royal line of descent is developed. The king's son inherits the job of being king.

Custom and sometimes even written law appear, to establish that there are some things a king may do and some things he may not do. But we still call it one-man rule. And of the same kind of government are dictatorships, tyrannies, or structures headed by czars or Incas or mikados.

The structure of this government looks like this:



There is room at the top for only one person. The people at the bottom are ruled; the one at the top is the ruler.

This is the basic governmental structure. And we begin our experience with government by using this form and by putting a king or patriarch at the top of this structure.

Now we come to what human energy does within political structures. Political human energy always flows from the top, down. So the king, or whoever is put on top, exercises his prerogatives. He issues decrees or he commands and orders, and power flows from him down the slope of this structure.

Rarely, these days, do we have a structure as simple as this one. We build all kinds of bureaus and departments and we put men into them and from each of them a certain amount of power flows. It is a natural law

that this political power proceeding from office holders flows down hill. In the military, it is called "going thru channels."

However, the men occupying these positions would quickly drain themselves dry of energy if it were their own energy that is used in this power flow. It isn't. There is another action of human energy that goes on inside the structure. This energy is supplied by the political volunteers who look up adoringly to men in power and have learned to say one word and to say it very well and very loud and very often. That word is YES. There is a power of acquiescence in the word YES. This is the power of sanction on which all governments exist.

Now, the nature of this sanction, this acquiescence, seems to be that it acts like a gas. It expands and it tends to rise . . . like hot air. It rises within this structure and exerts a pressure at each point where some of the gas can be trapped. Obviously, it exerts its greatest pressure at the highest point.

Thus, when the king ascends the throne and sits on top of this structure, to his surprise he finds that he is sitting on what amounts to a vent hole in a volcano. There is pressure mounting under him for him to "do something." He must perform. He does. As a matter of fact, he "goes off." He erupts. He sheds his benign light on the lesser persons making up his kingdom. Power flows down from his outstretched hands. It is the power that has been confided to him by the glad affirmatives of his subjects.

But political power, though marvelous to behold, invariably injures some while in process of extending benevolences to others.



And as time passes, the number of injuries becomes oppressive and the number of benevolences becomes less impressive.

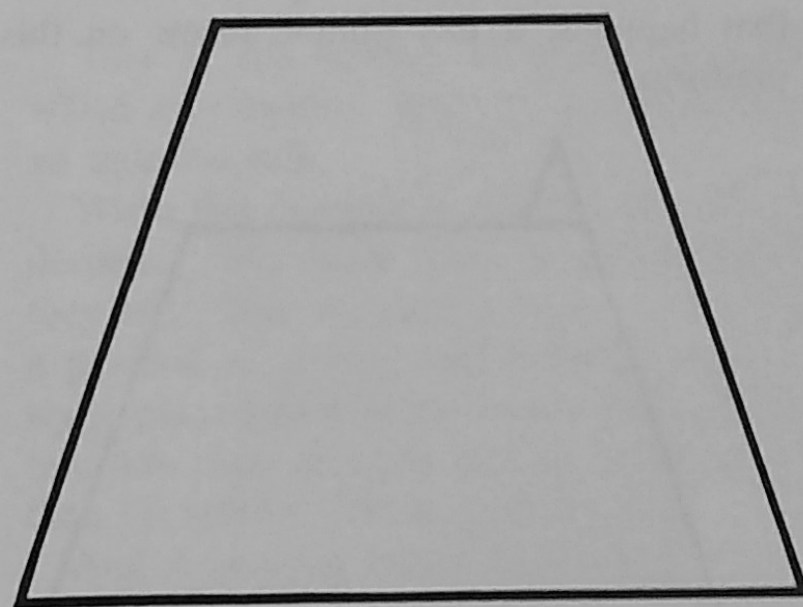
Finally, the weary populace, groaning under a fresh load of taxes and experiencing the lash of oppression and repression, take affairs into their hands and conduct the king from his throne. There are graceful ways of doing this and there are crude ways of doing it; but the people do it when they make up their minds to do it. We should keep in mind that the principal merit in the election process is that it provides a graceful way of discarding a monarch. A revolution is nothing more than an election with guns.

In essence they say: "Let's get a *good man* as king." And if we question them we find them admitting that at the time they chose their prior king they thought he was a good man. But after he got into office he began to behave in a peculiar fashion. So they realized they had made a mistake. And now they must get a really good man to make up for the prior mistake.

The new monarch is conducted to his throne and once more the glad affirmatives make the welkin ring. What happens to the "good king" now enthroned? Precisely what happens to any human being who finds himself sitting on the vent hole of a volcano. He begins to erupt. And once more the populace look at one another in amazement. "How could we be so mistaken?" they ask each other. "He seemed like a fine man before we put him up there. But look at him now. Let's see if we can't get a **GOOD** man in office, next time."

Now, this process will continue for gen-

eration after generation and sometimes it will continue for century after century. Finally, however, the people begin to study the problem. And they conclude after due consideration that the problems they have been experiencing have been induced, not by a long run of bad luck in selecting men but by the nature of the structure itself. No one man should have so much power. The structure is redesigned. It is made to look like this:

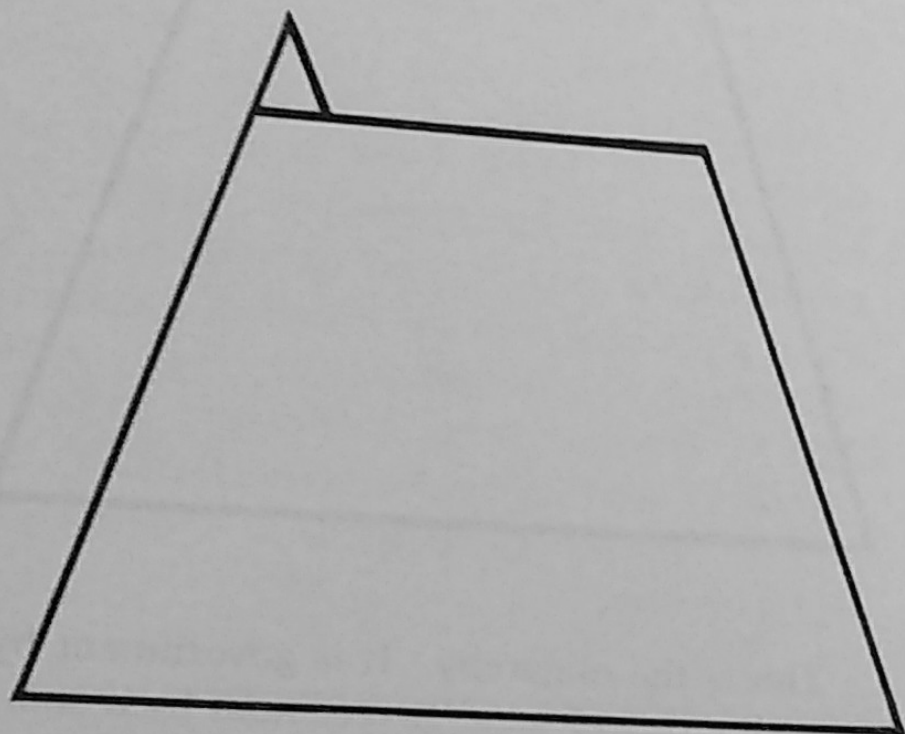


This is the oligarchy. It is government by a small group of men, government by a committee. The characteristic is that each man in the committee is to have equal power. So the pyramid does not come to a peak; instead, it rises to a platform which is as wide as necessary to accommodate the number of men to occupy it. There have been oligarchies with as few as three men and as many as sixty.

Again let us consider the operation of human energy in this structure. Political power

...the top down. But there is no top. There is only a platform. However, the pressure of affirmation still exists within the structure but it has no central point at which it can be captured. The committee is looked to as a group. A stalemate ensues. But not for long.

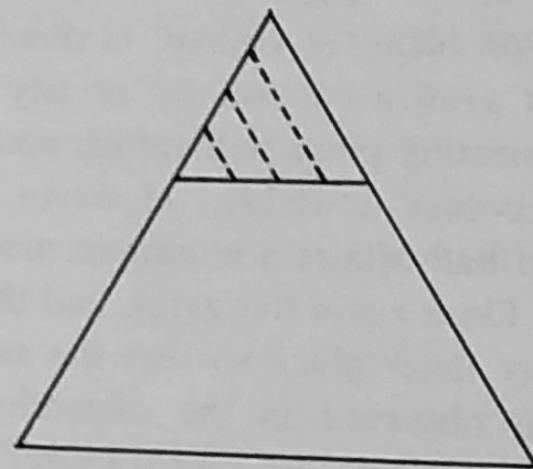
The members of the oligarchy have their first meeting. They stare at each other for a while and finally some member suggests: "Let's try to get something done." A chairman is selected to hold the gavel. And when that happens, a tiny pimple forms on this platform.



The gas below the platform tends to rush to this area. And power begins to flow from the highest point, which now does exist.

If the holder of the gavel handles himself adroitly, the pimple will grow to a boil, the boil to a carbuncle. Presently, after repeated enlargings, the same thing that emerged in

the prior structure emerges in this one. Government has created its own top most reaches.



This is the history of every oligarchy which ever existed. Rule by a committee is an unstable rule.

When this impasse is reached, the people despair. "We must have a government!" they cry. "But we cannot trust one man in a position of power, and behold, when we try to place power in the hands of a committee, one man emerges having more power than his fellows. What shall we do?"

And at last they invent democracy.

Now, in theory, democracy is a straight line, like this:



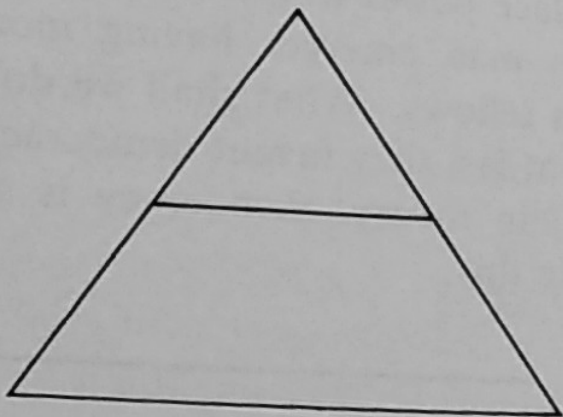
It means that all the people rule all the people. Of course, a pure democracy such as represented by this straight line calls for no government at all. And this sort of thinking is terrifying, so very quickly it is decided that some kind of structure must exist. Jefferson saw the point and perhaps said it as well as anyone: "Democracy works best at the town hall level." The people can gather



to be manageable and there they can act directly on the issues.

The problem, of course, is that in a nation, or even a community of any size, no single meeting place will suffice and democracy becomes unwieldy. However, even in its town hall affairs a chairman must be selected. Once again the gavel, and the rise of authority takes place so that the same process we observed in the oligarchy occurs here, although it does take a longer time for it to manifest.

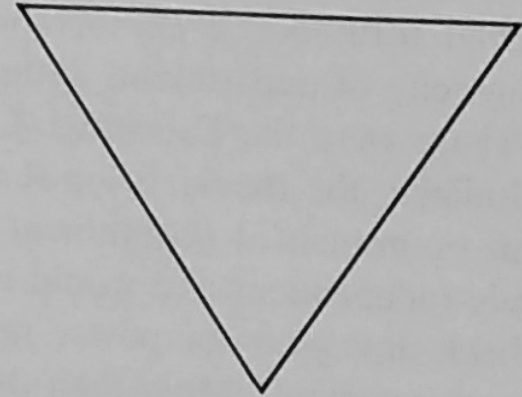
The practical flaw of democracy is remedied by the introduction of republican ideas. Instead of having all the people act directly on the issues, all of the people act directly to select representatives, and the representatives then act on the issues. This creates this type of structure:



The problem appears to be that however we strive to prevent it, to modify the situation or to construct a system of checks and balances, a top is always formed and power in the government structure accumulates at the top.

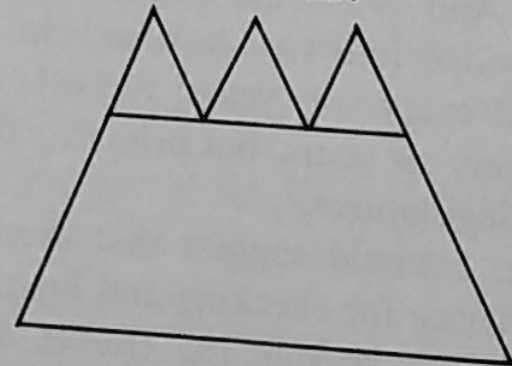
Now, when our founders considered the new world and the opportunity that existed here, they embarked upon a bold adventure. The Declaration of Independence offered an

entirely different concept from anything that had ever been suggested before. Here is what it looked like:



The people were to be at the top, individually sovereign. The government was to be at the bottom. The people were to control the government. Of course, the Declaration of Independence is a declaration and not a government structure. In fact, this structure was never built. I am not certain it could be built. If you will observe, it is unstable, top-heavy, and if it fell to one side the classical form of the equilateral triangle would again emerge.

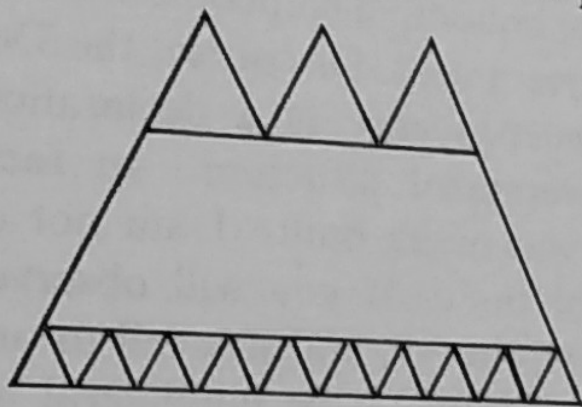
However, after the American Revolutionary War had terminated and the federalists gained sufficient support to put over the constitutional form of government they had in mind, they did erect a structure which was unique in the annals of political history. Here is what it looked like:



It had a broad base with the people at the bottom who were to act to select representa-



make certain that the failure of all oligarchies did not occur this time, we created, not a monarchical form nor a democratic form but an oligarchy of departments rather than of men. These were the Executive, Legislative and Judicial, the theory being that each department or branch of government would be relatively independent and would thus be able to check any grab for power made in some other department. More than that, the structure itself was to rest upon various sovereign states, which occupied this position:



and this was to serve as a limitation on the power to be centralized.

Additionally, terms of office were limited in time. The chief Executive was to be selected, not by the people directly but through an electoral college. The Judicial functionaries were not to be elected at all, but appointed. And as for the Legislative branch, it was divided into two sections, the one to be elected every two years; the other to be elected every six years, but primarily through the state legislatures.

In fact, I would suggest that every conceivable device for checking and limiting the government, to prevent the rise of a dominant central, all-powerful head, was introduced. Not the least of these innovations

was the presentation of a written constitution. It was believed that by setting forth in writing the basic understanding, a tangible limitation would be created.

I have in my hand the 1962-63 Government Organizational Manual. This is the official publication put out by the Government Printing Office each year, containing a listing of all government agencies and functions and a very brief description as to how each one conducts its affairs.

Here in the beginning of the book is simply a copy of the Constitution.

Beginning on page 17 is the Legislative branch. The Legislative branch contains the names of all the present senators and members of the House of Representatives. This takes several pages. Following are the names of the various bureaus which are managed directly through the Congress:

Architect of the Capitol  
United States Botanic Garden  
General Accounting Office  
Government Printing Office  
Library of Congress

The Legislative branch listings terminate on page 42.

Next we have the Judicial section. This begins on page 43 and includes the Supreme Court, special courts, appellate courts, the federal district courts, and terminates on page 50.

The balance of the book is the Executive department. It runs from page 51 to page 571.

In other words, ladies and gentlemen, despite every precaution and every political theory that could be advanced by the brain-

...most dedicated men history has produced, precisely the same result occurred in the American experience as has happened in every other country in every other time in the history of the world.

I am compelled to conclude, as a result of careful analysis and extensive observation, that the phrase, limited government, is an illusion. Essentially, it is a contradiction in terms.

When you grant to some men the power to pass laws, to amend those laws, to interpret those laws, and to enforce those laws, you cannot at the same time pass to other men a contrary power which will hold the first men in check. Those who have power, have it; those who do not have it, do not have it. Unlimited government is a redundancy; limited government, an illusion.

Our problem, as I see it, is to recognize the enormous virtue of self-government and to learn to be honest enough that we will not confuse self-government with any system whatever which deprives us of self-government.

The man who is able to govern himself is the free man. The man who is governed by others is the slave.

I have decided in favor of freedom and self-government for myself.



## ROBERT LEFEVRE

Robert LeFevre is founder-president of Freedom School (founded 1956). He is editor, Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, one of 12 Freedom Newspapers, which publish his editorials.

His books include "The Nature of Man and His Government," "This Bread Is Mine" and "Constitutional Government Today in Soviet Russia."

He is a noted speaker specializing in the field of human liberty.



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